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ABSTRACT

This document examines the work of Dewey, Kolb, Jarvis, Mezirow, Freire, Rogers, and Houle to find out what these experiential learning theorists have to say about the role experience plays in making learning meaningful. The first section addresses each writer's work for specific ideas of how experience is related to making learning meaningful, including what learning is like, what outcomes are intended, and implications for instruction. In the second section, major concepts are extrapolated about the relationship of experience to learning that are evident in all or most of the works examined. Those concepts include interaction and continuity; creation of new knowledge, awareness, and ability; the integration and expansion of perception; and the development of understanding and self-direction. Among the implications for adult educators are the importance of understanding the learner's personal and social background, arranging the learning conditions, preparing learners for the contradiction and conflict that the learning experience is likely to incite, posing problems that will result in learning, and facilitating reflection and dialogue about the meaning and effect of the learning experience. The conclusion states that the works examined argue for the necessity of actively engaging adult educators who are responsible for actually bringing learners into a confrontative position with their own thinking in order to grow beyond its limitations. The document concludes with a seven-item bibliography. (CML)

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WHAT MAKES LEARNING MEANINGFUL?

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INTRODUCTION

What makes learning meaningful is a question of some significance for educators and learners alike. Psychologists, philosophers, educators, and others have attempted various answers, yet no pervasive point of view has consistently dominated educational thinking. Within education, behavioralists, cognitivists, humanists, and experientialists have each made attempts to define this elusive element. Adult education, while borrowing from many conceptions of learning, has tended toward an experiential approach to learning in order to develop a more integrated view of these positions.

At this point we have chosen not to examine the work of behavioralists and cognitivists, choosing instead to focus on the writers who address the concept of how experience makes learning meaningful, that is, to examine the thinking that seems to have contributed significantly to learner-centered, experientially-based adult education. Consequently, we have reviewed the work of Dewey, Kolb, Jarvis, Mezirow, Freire, Rogers, and Houle. Each of these has something to say about the role of experience in learning, yet each represents various perspectives on how experience relates to learning. Some are in adult education and some not; all are noteworthy for their different perspectives on experience in the learning process and its significance.

The paper is organized in two parts. In the first, we examine each of the writers for specific ideas of how experience is related to making learning meaningful. In doing that we include a discussion of what the process of learning is like, what outcomes are intended, and implications for instruction. In the second, we seek to extrapolate major concepts about the relationship of experience to learning that are evident in all or nearly all of the work examined. From this integration, we attempt to draw implications for the practice of adult educators.

PART 1: EXPERIENTIAL THEORISTS

Dewey: Learning through Experience

Dewey was writing in reaction to what he termed the traditional view of education which he described as the imposition of subject matter on learners without the experience to understand it. In its place he proposed his view of progressive education which has as its essential tenet learning through experience. For Dewey, this means that education has to be embedded in the real life experience of the learner, that the experience has to connect

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with the past of the individual as well as propel him or her into the future, and that the experience is the product of the interaction of the individual with his or her environment. For experience to be meaningful, it has to conform to these parameters.

In order for this meaningfulness to develop, two essential conditions have to be met. First, in reaction to the disconnectedness of traditional education, Dewey proposed the concept of continuity by which he means that every educational experience both connects to those that have gone before it and is anticipatory of those that come after. To be linked in this fashion is not sufficient, however. What is also necessary is that each experience qualitatively modifies further experiences (and is qualitatively modified by previous ones) so that they become more expansive and developmental. By implication, a mis-educative experience is one that arrests or distorts the individual's capacity for growth. The second major principle is the one of interaction. Dewey maintained that all individuals live in a social environment that is characterized by interactions among individuals' needs, desires, purposes, and capacities to create experiences. These he referred to as situations. Experience is a function of the transaction between the individual and whatever constitutes his or her environment. Educative experience is that which is continuous with past and future and interactive with the learner's environment. These are the criteria by which experience is judged to be educative.

The goal for Dewey is to take advantage of the inherent moving force of experience to develop curiosity, strengthen initiative, and promote purpose. From this arises what Dewey calls intelligent activity by whiche means growth in judgment and understanding based on an ability to form purpose and the means to realize it.

Such a definition of educative experience entails certain responsibilities for the educator. For Dewey, knowing subject matter is only a small part of teaching. Because he maintains that learning emanates from the needs and experiences of the learner, it becomes the responsibility of the educator to arrange the conditions of the learning environment so that they interact with the individual to encourage growth and development. As Dewey put it, "the planning must be flexible enough to permit free play for individuality and yet firm enough to give direction towards continuous development" (1938, p. 69). This means that the educator has to position problems based on familiar experiences and to proceed from there to a more orderly understanding of the experience.

Kolb: Experiential Learning

According to Kolb learning is an interaction of an individual with an experience. During this interaction, an individual creates knowledge by transforming the experience into concepts. Because each interaction modifies concepts, there is a

continuous creation of knowledge. Learning will not occur unless there is continuity among the experiences. Further, the interaction that occurs has both personal and social consequences. While individuals create their own knowledge, they do so in a specific sociological context that influences the situations in which they create knowledge.

It is curiosity about a circumstance that moves an individual to learn. Curiosity then gives way to direction as the learner realizes a purpose for learning. Kolb maintains that in order for learning to occur the learner must be willing to interact with the experience. Once open to an experience, the learner grasps the experience in one of two ways: either apprehensively which refers to observing the tangible aspects of a situation or comprehensively which refers to understanding the concepts associated with the situation. When the experience is grasped in one of these two ways, the learner then transforms the experience into knowledge. This is also accomplished in two ways. It can be done actively where the learner manipulates the situation or internally as the learner reflects upon the situation. The means of grasping and transforming are dialectically opposed. This dialectical relationship must exist. These confrontations force the student to resolve the conflicts. Without the conflicts, there would be little incentive to attend to the situation.

Resolution of these conflicts, which represents the learning process, results not only in the creation of knowledge relevant for the learner but also in the futhering of his or her personal development. The student learns how to anticipate experiences, plan for them, and practice reactions to these possible situations. As each new experience is dealt with, the learners integrate the knowledge created from each new experience with knowledge gained from previous experiences. Kolb argues that this integration provides the learner with increased differentiation, that is, the learner has more available interpretations upon which to draw. Increased interpretations, in turn, lead to increased levels in consciousness. The result of enhanced consciousness is a personal liberation as the learner gains increased freedom and self-direction. But learning is also a social process and individual development is shaped by the cultural system of social knowledge. Thus the interpretations of experience are guided by the cultural perspective in which the learner lives.

Kolb maintains that learners will not learn if they are not open to experience. Nor will learning occur if the experience directly confronts the belief systems of the learners. Therefore, it is up to the educator to implant new ideas and to modify old ones that learners have without contradicting existing beliefs. This is accomplished as the educator guides the learners in bringing forth their beliefs, testing them, and then guiding the learners in integrating new ideas with old ones. Thus the educator is a manager of the learning process and environment since conditions must be created in which both personal and social knowlege is created.

Jarvis: The Social Context of Learning

When people interact with experiences that contradict their understanding of life, they begin to ask questions about the experience and their beliefs. Jarvis calls this contradiction a disjuncture which is a gap that exists between the present knowledge of the person and the present experience the person is involved in. By seeking answers to the questions, an individual can close the gap and create meaningful knowledge. Not all experiences, however, will lead to learning. Only meaningless ones will. Meaningless experiences are those with which students have had little previous interaction. A meaningful experience is one in which the learners have both previous knowledge and understanding and, consequently, have no need to ask questions. When questions are not asked, the learning does not occur. Learning is the process of students' asking questions about experiences they do not understand. Seeking answers leads to the creation of knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

According to Jarvis, people construct their own meaning systems. Thus learning begins with an experience that the learners do not fully understand and that conflicts with their present system of meaning. That meaning system is a combination of personal knowlege shaped by experience within a particular social and cultural system. Consequently, learners perceive and define situations from their own way of understanding which has been shaped by the larger society in which they have lived and even more so by the particular subculture in which they have grown up. Jarvis argues that any interaction of a learner with a situation is bound by these cultural factors as well as by time. But there are other factors which influence experiential learning. Jarvis maintains that learning arises from a disjuncture between experience and understanding which incites questioning. Not any disjuncture will suffice, however. Jarvis suggests that the gap that exists must relate closely to the individual's meaning system if the learner is to respond. If the gap is too large, then learning will not occur. The key connector in this respect is the role of past experience. Meaningful learning is not just the result of questioning a perplexing situation, it is also a matter of relating it to previous experience. This is why the disjuncture can not be too great, for if it were, then connections with previous experience could not be established. Making sense of a situation, then, is a matter of gaining comprehension through answering questions and a process of making connection with relevant past experience. In such a manner, continuity between past and present is developed which adds relevance and meaning to the learning. The final ingredient is the time to reflect upon this whole process, for without reflection Jarvis argues that the necessary personal and social connections cannot be made.

Jarvis suggests that the results of this process affect both the individual and society. From an individual point of view, "learning changes the person" but "all learning does not

automatically result in growth, and some learning experiences result in the curtailment of the potential to grow" (1987, p. 193). So, either learning has the potential to aid the growth and development of the individual or to arrest it. But Jarvis also argues that individuals do not exist in isolation, that is, they exist in relation to society. Thus learning affects both the individual and the society of which he or she is a part. Jarvis says "that the person does not exist in isolation but only as person-in-society. Hence, it might well be argued that the highest end product of learning is the enhancement of the person-in-society" (1987, p. 194). Jarvis questions Dewey's emphasis on education of the individual as the ultimate achievement: "such liberal approaches to the person need to be reconceptualized in terms of both individual and social good, recognizing the reality of the development of the person" (1987, p. 194).

Since both the learner's view of the world and education itself are normative, a major conflict between an experience and the learner's meaning system will prevent learning. It is the educator's responsibility to consider the social past that the learners bring with them. Further, Jarvis does not see the role of the educator as one of seeking to change society, even though one goal is to lead the students to question their value systems. An end result of this may be that the consciousness of the individual may be raised and social change may inadvertently occur. The instructor is only required to attend to the questioning, not the resulting fervor. Also, because learning occurs only when there is a disjuncture between present knowledge and experience, the educator must accept the responsibility to create this disjuncture in order to provide motivation for the students. The educator must also assist in relating the disjuncture to the learners' past experience and social background. This means that cultural boundaries must be bridged if learning is to take place.

Mezirow: Disorienting Dilemmas and Perspective Transformation

Mezirow's critical theory of adult learning (1981) has probably provided the most expansive description to date of what may be involved in meaningful learning for adults. He originally (1981; this view has undergone some revision since then) envisioned, after German philosopher Habermas, learning as occurring in three distinct forms: technical, interactional, and emancipatory. The one most familiar to educators refers to what Mezirow calls instrumental learning which is based on choosing alternatives among identifiable variables and making predictions within observable physical or social realities. Derived from logico-positivist thinking and focused on the search for regularities, it is the most common form of developing knowledge in the physical and social sciences. The second form of learning, the interactional, has as its focus not a technical view of reality but an emphasis on understanding what it takes to communicate within norms of society. Rather than being interested in causality, practical learning, often referred to as hermeneutics, is more concerned with understanding the meaning of

events, not just their observation. The third learning domain, emancipatory, "involves an interest in self-knowledge...including interest in the way one sees oneself, one's roles and social expectations. Emancipation is from libidinal, institutional or environmental forces which limit our options and rational control over our lives..." (1981, p. 5). The process of this emancipation is critical self-awareness through which the learner comes to understand these forces and their effect upon behavior. Critical reflectivity is a method of becoming aware of why we view reality in the manner that we do, a "becoming aware of our awareness and critiquing it" (1981, p. 13).

Emancipatory learning initiates in what Mezirow calls a disorienting dilemma. This is an event, or more likely a series of events, whose anomalous and existential character forces the individual to examine and question the very assumptions and values which provide the basis for behavior. This critical examination of habitual and cultually induced perceptions, thoughts, and actions is what provides the meaning to learning. Mezirow's view of learning is based upon the role of experience and how it influences thinking and understanding. A meaning perspective is "the stucture of psycho-cultural assumptions within which new experience is assimilated and transformed by one's past experience" (1981, p.6). Meaning is based on how what we percieve matches with what we have been led to perceive by our particular psychological and cultural experience. Emancipatory adult learning, according to Mezirow, is a matter of undergoing a critical examination of these factors in a transformative process, or as he puts it, "becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings" (1981, p. 6). Mezirow describes the goal of transformation in the following manner: "A superior perspective is not only one that is a more inclusive or discriminating experience of integrating but also one that is sufficiently permeable to allow one access to other perspectives" (1981, p. 9).

Mezirow's theory of adult learning presents a much more inclusive set of responsibilities for the adult educator. Once again, subject matter mastery is merely a minor element in the educator's realm of activity. Mezirow's descriptions of the domains of learning suggest that educators require different methodologies for different domains. Mezirow describes it in this manner: "we have tacitly recognized the vast differences in helping adults learn how to do something or to perform a task from helping them develop sensitivity and understanding in social relations and from helping them effect perspective transformation" (1981, p. 17). Mezirow rightly criticizes educators for failing to realize these distinctions and for attempting to employ task analysis, which is appropriate for performance based education, in facilitating social communication and emancipatory learning. Social communication requires a focus

on helping learners to uncover and understand the ways and conditions in which people interact. Perspective transformation requires an "emphasis on helping the learner identify real problems involving reified power relationships rooted in institutionalized ideologies which one has internalized in one's psychological history" (1981, p. 18). Not only has Mezirow defined three distinct arenas of learning, he has also begun the analysis of how each of these requires a different set of educational repertoires.

Freire: Education and Liberation

Since its appearance in the early 70s, Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed has had an ever increasing presence in the literature and thinking of western adult educators. But what is the pedagogy? Freire presents a theory of cultural action. Primarily, Freire perceives a "culture of silence" whereby people are imbued with ignorance and lethargy because of the oppression of economic, social, political, and educational forces that inhibit understanding and acting upon the world. From Freire's point of view, people are mostly "reactors" to the forces of a world that they only vaguely understand because they have little power with which to act. The reason for this vagueness is that people typically are not critical of the assumptions and values upon which their perceptual systems are constructed. These societally determined belief systems are typically imposed by the dominant culture and contribute to repressing the learners.

Freire makes several assumptions which predicate much of his pedagogy. Among them are his belief that all people are capable of examining their perceptions of the world in "dialogic encounter." Freire feels that personal growth depends upon an individual"s becoming conscious of the culturally imposed habits of perception and dealing critically with it. To this end, he sees education as both subversive and liberating. Its purpose is to provide people with the process by which this heightened consciousness produces a more enlightened view of the world. Freire's view of education is decidely partisan and his theory of cultural action is acutally one of prescription for its conceptual order.

Freire is highly critical of what he terms the "banking" notion of education: he describes education as suffering from "narration sickness" which presents reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. He goes on to note that the object of banking education is to fill the students with the contents of narration with an emphasis on recording, memorizing, and repeating. This, he feels, is one of the repressive forces of society that inhibit the growth of individuals. He would also describe it as meaningless education because it offers no enlightenment.

Ultimately, liberation for Freire is a process of praxis whereby men and women alternately act upon and reflect about their world

in order to transform it. For Freire praxis is a way of both transforming the individual's entire life context as well as mechanism for restructuring the society in which the individual finds him or herself. For Freire, this is what brings meaning to education.

How is this praxis instituted or implemented? Conceptually praxis is a key component of Freirian liberation. Its methodological counterpart is the use of "dialogues." Dialoguing is an educational technique of "problem-posing" in which students are brought to review and reconstruct their perceptions about their world through a process of viewing and examining their reactions to familiar situations and circumstances. Freire notes that "dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (p. 76) and "the object of the investigation is not men...but rather the thought-language with which men refer to reality..."(p. 86). In other words, dialoguing is the process by which learners examine their underlying assumptions and cognitions which in principle guide their overt behavior. It is these underlying perceptions which allow the oppression that so concerns Freire. It is the revealing and subsequent understanding of the individual's perceptual reality that is the goal of education as liberation. According to Freire, "reflections upon situationality is reflection about the very condition of existence" (p. 100). This method of thematic investigation and problem-posing is the "effort to present significant dimensions of an individual's contextual reality, the analysis of which will make it possible for him to recongnize the interaction of the various components" which guide her or his behavior (p. 95). Libertarian education develops when "men come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly" (p. 118). The goal of education is thus the liberation of people.

Once again we see a greatly expanded role for the adult educator. For Freire, the content of education is not a static body of knowledge but the stuff of life itself. This requires the educator to become well versed in the conditions of the learners because it is from these situations that the learning emanates. The educator has the responsibility of examining the environment of the learners, uncovering the power relationships that contribute to constraining the view the learners have of themselves and their world, and constructing materials that enable learners to examine and come to comprehend the habitual patterns of thought and action which serve to arrest their growth and development as fully realized human beings.

Rogers: Significant Learning

Rogers refers to meaningful learning as being significant and bases his view on the conditions he believes makes psychotherapy a significant form of learning. In essence he argues that therapy is learning which results in a changed individual. Such an individual becomes more self-confident, self-directing, less

perceptually rigid, more accepting of others, adopts more realistic goals, and generally behaves in a more mature fashion. He makes the same case for education, arguing that the conditions which are conducive to successful therapy are similar to those which result in successful education. At the basis of his position is his contention that learning is more than the accretion of knowledge, that knowledge needs to be functional, not just retained.

Most of Rogers' interest in education has to do with the pre-conditions which establish conducive circumstances for significant learning. While much of his description has to do with the educator's relationship to the student (the concepts of unconditional positive regard, congruence, etc.), there are several elements which provide insight into the learning process. Like Dewey and others, Rogers maintains that the need, focus, and consequence of learning arise most sharply from the experience of the individual. Rogers refers to it as "facing a problem" which he describes as "an uncertain and ambivalent desire to learn or to change, growing out of a perceived difficulty in meeting life" (1959, p. 233). Rogers describes this as education that is directly connected with the problems a student faces in his or her real existence. Facing a problem is what makes learning meaningful in Rogers' view. A second element is Rogers' notion of empathy. In psychotherapeutic terms, the therapist has to be able "to sense the client's world as if it were your own, but without losing the `as if' quality" (1959, p. 235). Likewise in education, the educator has to have a command and understanding of the learner's world in order to better be able to recognize and utilize the conditions which give rise to the need to learn. Finally, the process of learning has to do with examining the perceptual structures which have tended to constrain thinking to a particular perspective and allowing these structures to loosen and become open to reality. This has the effect of allowing the individual to become more open to experience, or as Rogers puts it, "the evidence within himself as well as the evidence without" (1959, p. 235).

As in therapy, the goal for Rogers' view of education is an individual who is more realistically able to understand the world, less susceptible to perceptual constraints, and more fully self-actualizing, "a fluid, changing, learning person" (1959, p. 235). Education for Rogers is not the accumulation of knowledge for its own sake but its development into something that is "functional, which makes a difference, which pervades the person and his actions" (1959, p. 233). For Rogers, the goal of education is to provide the experiences that allow the learner to be self-respecting, self-motivated, and free to pursue the course of action that is most relevant to him or her. Rogers describes the ultimate goal of education as providing "tickets of entrance" (1959, p. 237) by which he means that the only relevant measure of education is whether the learner has gained the wherewithal to obtain the place she or he desires. Acquiring these entrance tickets is the meaningful result of learning.

As for implications for the educator, Rogers maintains that the essence of significant education resides in the character of the interaction between educator and learner and that "the task of the teacher is to create a facilitating classroom climate in which significant learning can take place" (1959, p. 236). The role of the instructor is one of discovering the circumstances out of which the student's learning arises. In this respect, the teacher also functions as a resource but not a source of educational imposition. Rogers argues that for significant learning to occur the instructor-learner relationship must be one built on trust and empathy and characterized by an attitude of freedom to learn.

Houle: The Inquiring Mind

Houle in his now classic work, The Inquiring Mind, asked an essential question: what is the nature of the adult learner. It is a question that still receives considerable attention almost thirty years later. Houle noted at the time that there was a tendency to seek answers to this question from an institutional perspective. That is, the characteristics of adult learners tended to be defined from the perspective of the institution serving the particular interest of a certain type of learner. Then, as now, the response tended to focus on the familiar demographic descriptions of age, educational background, occupation, class, race, and other variables. Houle chose instead to examine the learners themselves, not to describe them but to have them describe themselves, to ask them directly how they thought of learning and what made it meaningful to them. Two biases are openly accorded in Houle's analysis. The first concerns the goal of education which is lifelong learning. The second is that Houle deliberately chose to interview "adults who engage in an outstanding degree in activities which are commonly thought to be education" (1961, p. 4). His purpose then was to try to understand the nature, the beliefs, and the actions of those most likely to be lifelong learners.

His results, which have received considerable research attention, are the three types of learners: the goal-oriented, the activity-oriented, and the learning-oriented. The goal-oriented are those who see education as a means to an end. They are the ones often discussed in adult education literature as using education to meet some specific objective such as promotion credentials or solution to a particular problem. The activity-oriented typically attend education for reasons other than the stated purpose of the class or activity. Often what makes education meaningful for this group is the social nature of education, the feeling of belonging, or the gentle atmosphere typical of most adult education environments. The purest type disclosed by Houle's research was the learning-oriented. These sought learning situations for their own sake. Learning was something they did as a way of life, it was what brought meaning and purpose to their existence. But before describing these three sub-types of continuing learner, Houle was careful to note that each type actually derived from a single larger category.

Houle described it this way: "They all had goals which they wished to achieve, they all found the process of learning enjoyable or significant, and they all felt that learning was worthwhile for its own sake" (1961, p. 15).

While The Inquiring Mind does not dwell much on the learning process itself, Houle offers some insights that still seem appropriate. For the goal and activity-oriented (but not so much for the learning-oriented), the pursuit of education tends to stem either from needs arising from a circumstance that becomes particularly pressing or from a personal stock-taking in which the individual decides to embark upon some change through education. Trigger events and disorienting dilemmas are names put to such events now. While essentially focusing on individuals, Houle also notes the unique blend of social and psychological factors that drive each individual in his or her involvement in education.

What makes learning meaningful for the learners of Houle's typology is clear in the descriptions that Houle provides. While common in intent, each has a particular emphasis that characterizes the significance of educational endeavors. For each of Houle's learners, learning is a natural way of life and this is what most compels Houle's interest. Lifelong learning is the goal of adult education from his perspective and he has uncovered these leaners to demonstrate its influence and effectiveness.

In terms of implications for the educator, Houle's typology makes it clear that not all learners are engaged for the same reason. While seemingly trite, educators would do well to remember this when planning programs or facilitating learning. It reminds us too that education can have numerous purposes, not just what is stipulated in a course catalogue or a syllabus. But perhaps most importantly, Houle's work reminds us that the real worth or meaning of learning resides in the learner and not the educator. Houle deliberately chose to query learners who were selected for his investigation by the very fact of their extensive involvement in education. Not only did he wish to demonstrate his belief in lifelong learning, for surely his interviewees fit that characterization, but he also wanted to understand what made learning meaningful from the learner's point of view, not from the provider's. It is a lesson still needing to be heeded today, that we not listen too intently to the echoes of our own suspicions of what we as educators think makes learning meaningful.

PART II: INTEGRATION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ADULT EDUCATION PRACTICE

The overlap in ideas that seems evident from the initial overview will form the focus of our discussion in this section of the paper. What has become notable in this review of these various perspectives on what makes learning meaningful is the consistent emphasis on the role of experience in meaningful learning. In

every case there is attention to situating education within the experience of the learner and utilizing that connection to expand the educational horizons of the learner. In nearly every case as well (with the notable exception of Freire and somewhat less so with Jarvis), there is also a consistent reliance on an individual focus, that is, a reliance on humanistic psychology to interpret and understand the learning process. Further, what these orientations suggest is a broader, more integrative set of responsibilities for the educator. In this section we will list some implications for adult education practice by outlining an integrated definition of what meaningful learning experiences are as well as making some suggestions of what the expanded educator's role will be.

Learner's Experience

In all of the descriptions presented, the single most consistent characteristic of experiential learning is the emphasis on using the learner's real world experience as the starting place of learning. Every depiction suggested begins at this point with the awareness that for learning to be relevant and meaningful it has to emanate from the actual needs of the individual. Each of the writers is implicitly or explicitly critical of imposing needs from external sources. What seems most important is that the learner have a sense of connection, a point of reference, for beginning the learning process. That connection resides in the interface between the individual's internal history of experience and the outer world.

Interaction and Continuity

In order for learning to be relevant and meaningful, it has to do more than connect with the personal history of the individual. Dewey first suggested but all the others seem to concur that learning is a process of some direct interaction with an experience. This is an interaction characterized by involvement and immersion in a situation, not just acquaintance with it. The spirit of experiential learning is that learners do something, not just see, hear, or talk about it.

What makes interaction significant, however, is the manner in which it relates to the personal history (or biography, as Jarvis calls it) of the individual. Direct interaction is not as relevant as direct interaction that solidly connects with the personal history of the individual. This is a connection that takes full account, indeed, emanates from the past of the individual. This involves the concept of continuity first described by Dewey. Continuity not only accounts for a direct interaction and connection with the learner's previous experience but also leads to future experience. In this manner experience connects with the past of the individual, interacts with the present, and anticipates future experiences.

Awareness of personal history is not inclusive. Each and every individual, while an incorporation of personal experiences, is

also a repository of social and cultural values, perceptions, and experience. It is these socially constructed frames of reference mediated by personal history that have considerable influence in the learning process for they represent the manner in which the individual is likely to perceive, process, and incorporate the learning experience. From several points of view, it is this conjuction of personal and socially inculcated value structures that are the most significant factor in and target of learning. For many proponents of experiential learning, the final product of learning is an ongoing process of experience and critical reflection upon the very values that guide behavior in order to develop an ever more expansive and comprehensive understanding of reality.

Questions and Critical Reflection: Creating New Knowledge, Awareness, Ability

A continuous, interactive experience is not enough for relevant learning. A situation that is not somehow at odds with the previous experience of the learner is not likely to induce learning. So, while learning has to relate to biography, it also has to provide contradiction, some element of mystery or doubt, to invite a learning response. Jarvis refers to this as a disjuncture between experience and understanding which, when resolved through questioning and seeking answers, creates new knowledge for the individual. Rogers calls it "facing a problem" by which he means the individual consciously recognizes the need to resolve a conflict. Mezirow refers to disorienting dilemmas by which he means experience which cannot be easily assimilated into the learner's current meaning perspective. The resultant conflict requires critical review in order to comprehend the significance and realign the perceptual patterns.

So questions themselves only begin the learning process. All of the writers discuss the need for time and reflection in order to comprehend the change that learning induces. Learning is a process that takes time, and part of the reason for this time has to do with the need to think about and to consder what the ramifications are of the experience the learner has undergone. Each also refers to this as a critical process of not just examining the learning itself but also the very nature of the experience, the circumstances of perception, and the values that guide the understanding of the experience. All of the writers speak to this critical element. Learning is not significant until it has undergone this conscious critical process that forces the learner to actively incorporate the new learning into his or her behavioral repertoire.

Integration and Expansion of Perception

Kolb argues that integration provides the learner with increased differentiation and makes more interpretations of experience available to the learner. Increased interpretations, in turn, lead to increased levels in consciousness. The result of enhanced consciousness is a personal liberation as the learner

gains increased levels in consciousness, freedom, and self-direction. Mezirow ties integration into higher levels of criticalness which reflect a truly mature adult. Integration is a process of reflecting critically upon experience and incorporation the newly created understanding into the meaning perspective so that it becomes ever more elastic and able to encompass ever more diverse perceptions.

Development of Understanding and Self-direction

The result of this questioning and critical reflection is an expanding awareness and understanding of the world, how the individual perceives it, and how that perception influences behavior. So, while various needs and problems of the individual may be an initial focus of the learning process, the final focus becomes one of individual development and maturity through increasing self-knowledge and critical awareness.

Implications for the Adult Educator

An experiential approach to education requires a more active and integrative adult educator. Under these circumstances, knowing subject matter and arranging resources are less significant than the actual processing of learning. The experiential approach to learning seems to suggest at least five major functions that the adult educator needs to attend to: understanding the personal and social history of the individual, arranging the learning environment to engender experiential learning, preparing learners to engage contradictory circumstances, creating and posing problems to be resolved, and facilitating a dialogic and reflective processing of the learning experience.

Understanding Personal and Social Background

While it is a common charge in adult education to make learning relevant to the learner's experience, often the individual's personal and social background are not fully incorporated. It is clear from the experiential point of view that learning will not be relevant until this important analysis is made so that the learning experience can be directly connected to what is relevant to the learner. This means the educator has the responsibility of determining what personal and cultural conditions influence the learner's behavior and how these conditions influence what is significant to the learner. If this is not done, it is likely that the experience may represent too large a disjuncture and therefore be too meaningless for the learner to make the leap from what is known to a larger and more enterprising perspective.

Arranging the Learning Conditions

Once the personal and social analysis is completed, the educator then has more insight into how to arrange the learning environment to suit the particular perceptual framework and history of the individual. This can be a matter of matching materials to the psycho-cultural background of the learners, but

it can be a more complicated and involved process of actually developing an experience within the context of the learners so that a relevant connection is made with their previous experience. Thus the arrangement then becomes a bridge for the learner to use in crossing from previous understandings into the conflict of newer views and understandings. In such a fashion the arrangement of the learning environment becomes a vehicle by which the learner begins to expand the boundaries of previous experience.

Preparing the Learners

Given the background analysis and environment arrangment, the educator next has to prepare the learners for the contradiction and conflict which the learning experience is likely to incite. Perhaps Rogers' work provides the most insight into this process. He suggests that empathy and genuiness are critical teacher behaviors which allow the trust to develop which begins to foster a learner's willingness to engage an experience and investigate its consequences. Preparation itself requires the learner to think about what learning means in order to take advantage of experience. In this way the educator has to help the learner prepare to recognize the change brought about by the learning.

Problem Posing

The educator is also responsible for creating a disjuncture, posing problems. or generally confronting the understandings which the learners have historically relied upon. This is most clearly discussed in the work of Freire, Mezirow, and Jarvis. Each proposes that significant learning cannot occur without some contradiction between current understandings and its permutations during and after a learning experience. The educator has the responsibility of meriences which evolve from the learner's current frame of reference, yet also call to question the relevancy, accruacy, and usefulness of that perspective. In Freire's method, this requires using contemporary, familiar circumstances in dialogues about what are the inherent personal and social relationships and their ramifications concerning the learners' present conditions. For him this is a focus on repressive power relationships in society. But for all of the experientialists this means questioning the assumptions which guide behavior. For all learning is a process of self-investigation which results in a greater capacity for understanding of what guides thinking and doing.

Reflection

Finally, once the educator has constructed and set this process in motion, it then becomes necessary to facilitate the reflection and dialogue about the meaning and effect of the learning experience. All of the writers note the tricky balance required between allowing the learners to come to their own understandings versus the imposition of the instructor's view. If learning is to be truly significant, it has to emanate from the individual's

reflection and critical examination of his or her response to a learning experience. In this sense the educator needs to be particularly sensitive to her or his own views in relation to the emerging ones of the learners.

Conclusion

All of the experientialist reject impositional education which in their view is largely repressive and counterproductive. This is clearly at odds with more traditional functions of education which have as a goal the generational transference of social norms, cultural values, and instrumental knowledge. Yet, for the experientialists, meaningful learning generally emanates from the learners' personal and social history as a process of confronting contradictions in their understandings of themselves and their world. Learning is defined largely in terms of self-development and maturation. As for instructors, content mastery is low ranked and relatively unimportant in respect to the interpersonal and facilitative skills required of educators. But perhaps the most significant idea is the one of the educator as interventionist. Learner-centered adult education practice has used this philosophic tradition to provide its rationale for a process-oriented approach. Yet what we see in a review of this work is an argument for a much more actively engaging adult educator, one who has responsibility for actually bringing learners into a confrontive position with their own thinking in order to grow beyond its limitations.

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